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ABSTRACT

Professors in a Communication Arts methods course for preservice and inservice elementary school teachers sought to move the content of the language arts curriculum from a direct instruction to a whole language model. A transformation came about as one professor realized that her efforts to enthusiastically convey the importance of authentic meaning-making in developing language arts proficiency had resulted in filling students' heads with facts and had taken the life out of the subject. This dissonance created by not allowing students to make the very kind of meaning the professor told them they should allow their students to make did make that professor "a little crazy and uneasy." The concept of developmentally appropriate practice was then applied to teaching teachers. The professors began to do virtually everything they asked students to do. By seeing and doing a whole language procedure, verbal transactions about the procedure became concrete and purposeful. The modeling inspired students' confidence in the professors and in themselves. Students developed their listening and speaking skills in discussing, presenting information, and problem solving together. Students participated in Sustained Silent Reading, shared and paired reading, response writing, standard handwriting practice in the context of taking dictations of interesting passages from literature, production of an autobiographical story from prewriting to publishing, storytelling, and development of a thematic unit. The students leave the class with 20 to 25 new ideas, all of which have been demonstrated to some extent. (JDD)

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What about the Whole Teacher?
Creating a College Whole-Language Classroom Experience

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What about the Whole Teacher?

Creating a College Whole-Language Classroom Experience

Much has been written to date about whole language and the whole language approach to teaching in the classroom. The pros and cons of this approach have been debated in the literature for a number of years with both sides of the issue presenting some convincing evidence for their cause. As college teachers, our job has been to read the literature and make a reasoned judgment about our position on the issue, proceed from our own knowledge base as well as "gut" level and make decisions about how to best prepare elementary education majors to teach language arts. Initially, we thought it would be sufficient to simply switch from transmitting direct instruction methods to transmitting content which placed the use of direct instruction in the context of a whole language classroom structure. We quickly found that a change in method -- from transmission to transaction -- was necessary if we were to be "true" to the new content in our curriculum.

Some Problems with Transmission

"Cutting it up to can it" kills the subject and bores the students"

It may be very exciting for the scholar to take apart some area of interest in order to study every nuance of that subject and categorize its components to achieve a deeper, richer understanding of, and even add to, that body of knowledge. In fact, this is just the way some college professors feel about their own study of whole-language concepts and approaches. The very "aliveness" of this teaching philosophy (Goodman, 1986) is what attracts us to it and makes us want to transmit its every nuance to our preservice

and inservice elementary school teachers at the college where we teach. Categorizing its components and telling students about each part of a whole language classroom did not, however, help them achieve that deeper, richer understanding we had experienced and desired for them. We had gone from whole-to-part-to whole in our own studies and had thus created a real synthesis of this knowledge, but they were receiving only a distilled version of our experience.

John Dewey warned us decades ago not to separate subject from method when attempting to interest students in a body of knowledge. In 1916, Dewey's Democracy and Education set forth numerous reasons why we cannot afford to leave experience out of education. Particularly relevant to our situation is Dewey's belief that separating method from subject matter in teaching makes learning formal, mechanical, and constrained; it separates, not only the life from the subject, but the student from real experience of the world and thus interferes with that student's ability to accept responsibility for the consequences of his/her activity, including thought (1916, p. 179). It is just this kind of alienation and objectification we sought to overcome by moving the content of our language arts curriculum from a direct-instruction to a whole-language model.

The transformation of teaching style came about as a result of one professor trying for little over an hour to transmit this content and then realizing she had fallen into the very banking-model trap (Freire, 1993) a whole-language model promises to avoid.

She thought she had been enthusiastically conveying the importance of authentic meaning-making in developing proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. What she had, in fact, been doing was filling those heads with "facts," making the "right" deposits so students would build up a store of her knowledge. Yes, she had taken the life out of her subject and yes, the students were bored. Not "practicing what we preach" makes us crazy and our students angry

This dissonance created by not allowing students to make the very kind of meaning the professor told them they should allow their students to make did make that professor a little crazy and uneasy. Why was all the commitment and enthusiasm (on her part) resulting in no heated discussion, only pages and pages of notes? Surely students knew what it was like to be deprived of making their own meaning; it had to have happened to them in classroom after classroom, year after year. They had spent most of their lives being told what to think. Why did they not passionately embrace the idea that there was another way to learn?

A turning point occurred when the professor remembered some advice she had been given about teaching. That bold advice was to stop teaching the minute you realize methods are not working, to release the students and go straight back to the office and try to figure out what went wrong. This action was a turning point in two ways.

First, she found in the literature that this experience was not uncommon. According to Ross (1992) many teacher educators who

profess beliefs in holistic learning still use a transmission model of teaching. It is experiencing just the kind of dissonance described above that makes us aware of the problem. As this continues to happen, as our practice results in conflict between what is taught and how it is taught, hopefully the desire for resolution will help us to develop a closer and closer match between method and content. Encouraged by Ross, we began to change into an opportunity for experience nearly every whole-language concept we wanted to transmit, so that students could actively construct their own meanings and truly share those meanings with each other; the culture of the classroom was literally transformed "overnight" (see Pahl and Monson, 1992).

Calling a halt to that first lecture and changing everything so drastically, so immediately, also had a profound effect on the students' understanding of their own resistance: all of a sudden curricula could be seen as negotiable and resistance became unnecessary (Bintz, 1993). We made explicit the unfair nature of the initial experience, so students felt free to discuss their general anger at always being told to do as someone in power tells them while watching that person in power contradict her words with her own actions. The issue of who must hold the power if autonomous actions are to be taken -- by teachers, as facilitators, and students, as learners -- became very obvious to all of us under these conditions. We all began to empower each other (see Fagan, 1989) and the two of us responsible for teaching this course began to relate the concept of developmentally appropriate practice to

teaching teachers as well as young children (Vartuli & Pyfe, 1993).

Some Solutions in Transaction

"Putting our methods where our mouths are" models effective teaching and inspires students

As professors, we began to do virtually everything we asked our students to do. By seeing and doing a procedure, verbal transactions about the procedure became concrete and purposeful. As teachers of teachers, we began to call attention to our own meaning-making process and our own needs for empowerment. Making our own teaching and learning very explicit not only showed our students the importance of modeling desired behaviors, it inspired confidence.

First, our modeling inspired our students' confidence in us. We became "doers" of our words, not just "tellers," and that built a tremendous amount of trust. We could be counted upon to give practical, useful examples, not just theoretical advice.

Modeling inspired students' confidence in themselves, too. An "If she can do it, I can do it." attitude began to develop. This was compounded by the fact that by teaching our student to model by modeling, students began to do a great deal of modeling themselves, thus inspiring even more confidence in each other. Giving preservice teachers the kinds of experiences we want them to offer their students places value on those activities and generates empathy in our students for their students.

By emphasizing authentic meaning-making and the necessary empowerment for that to occur, the professors made decisions about

the use of time and space in the college classroom that reflected real possibilities for the theoretical elementary school classrooms for which our students would be planning curricula. Chenfeld (1993) declares there are only two choices in education: life and death. We happen to agree with her! As we discovered, it is all too easy, to take something that is very much alive and kill it by separating the idea from its lived experience. In order to "keep alive" the spirit of whole language, students had to "do" whole-language.

The decision to make the college language arts classroom a whole-language classroom meant that students would spend most of their time listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They would learn by doing. The listening skills that it would become necessary to develop in their own students in the future became very real to our students out of immediate need. Discussing, presenting information, problem-solving together--these speaking skills became a part of their everyday classroom experience just as we hope they will be part of those future elementary classrooms. All kinds of reading and writing became everyday rituals and/or heartfelt celebrations.

Literacy is not automatically valued at the college level; it needs to be actively promoted (Daisey, 1993). Graves has been telling us for some time now that we cannot hope to teach students to write unless we, as teachers, write (Shores, 1993; Graves, 1993). College students, especially those who want to become teachers, desperately need the time and the space and real reasons

to read and write. For literacy to be authentic, there must be some degree of ownership over one's own reading and writing processes (Myers, 1992). So time and space is spent reading about what we want to read and, at times, share; we spend time and space writing about what we want to record for ourselves and, at times, communicate to others.

We feel that we have put the "communication" back into our Communication Arts class. After a year of teaching language arts primarily "whole-language," we still get reports from some of our earliest students about how their love for reading was and remains revived and how they found they were writers after all and have written with more confidence and effectiveness in subsequent classes. Our later students have heard "what it's like in there" from earlier ones, so they come to us expecting the same results. Course evaluations consistently indicate that those expectations are being met.

Some Successful Transactions

Several methods were developed which encouraged the students in the communication process. Some of the specific ways students' reading choices were supported have been through Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), shared and paired reading, and response writing. We maintain a ritual of all participating in sustained silent reading for at least the first fifteen minutes of the first ten class meetings. When limited time requires us to make the transition to other beginning activities, this ritual is sorely missed. Of course, we hope both the ritual and its contrasting absence will

inspire students to maintain an SSR time daily when they have their own classrooms. Through shared reading (sometimes in pairs and sometimes with the whole group) students let each other know about poems, books, magazine articles, even letters from friends, that mean something special to them. This is often accompanied by journal responses and class discussion. It becomes a celebration of each student's personal reading choices and the meanings he/she has come to cherish through reading.

Standard handwriting is practiced in the context of taking dictations of interesting passages from literature (usually chosen by students). This exercise also increases students' awareness of gaps which may exist in their standard use of the English language. Dictations are self-corrected, so errors in spelling or punctuation are not threatening problems, simply mistakes to be corrected. Hearing and writing good literature also develops students' "ear" for the language and directly relates spoken English to written English.

Students do writing exercises, activities, and creative writing during the second half of the course. These are generally thought-provoking or just plain fun--intended to get and keep the juices flowing. One major piece of writing is done by going through the stages of the writing process from prewriting through to publishing. This project is an autobiographical story, but the choice of what to reveal is left strictly to each student. The writing of this story is reported by students as one of the most important experiences in the course. Students say they come to

know themselves, as well as each other, on an incredibly meaningful level. The stories are presented orally, with lots of laughter and tears, and then compiled in a class book. This experience of publishing not only gives students a great deal of responsibility for communicating effectively, it gives them a chance to bond with other preservice teachers in such a way that they truly become a team of educators.

Another form of encouraging students to use their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills is through the use of storytelling. Storytelling and the use of props to enhance the telling and retelling of children's books provides early practice in a non-threatening setting. Students prompt and encourage each other. Evaluation is directed at celebrating "what works" and discovering new approaches when problems are encountered.

Finally, students develop a thematic unit based on a personal interest. This requires them to make their own connections among materials and information available and to create unique ways to integrate subject matter through thematic planning. An overview of each theme is presented and one lesson from the unit is developed and taught. Each student leaves the course with twenty to twenty-five new ideas, all of which have been demonstrated to some extent. By this time, students realize how much they have taught themselves and each other--a trend we trust is likely to carry over to their own classrooms after having such a concentrated whole-language experience.

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